

# Agency Profile -L.A. City

By Richard Godino

*“Our history is long and convoluted. We have gone from being one of the premier lifeguard agencies in the nation for 50 years to nearly vanishing from the open water frontier for a decade to returning to some degree of respectability in the open water lifeguarding community. We are proud of this achievement and very proud to be part of the noble profession of open water /ifeguarding.”*

**I**n the early part of the twentieth century, lifeguards in Southern California were usually volunteers and were organized under either the United States Volunteer Lifesaving Corps or the American Red Cross Lifesaving Corps.

The City of Los Angeles started employing lifeguards in 1918 when it opened the North Broadway Plunge. Three more pools were opened to the public during the next four years. In 1922 the Playground Department named Dudley Degroot as the first Supervisor of Aquatics, and made him responsible for all aquatic activities in the City. In 1923, with the annexation of the town of Venice and the adjacent Venice Beach, the existing Venice and Ocean Park Lifeguards were organized under the leadership of Myron Cox, the City’s first and longest reigning Chief Lifeguard.

In 1925, the city of San Pedro was annexed and brought Cabrillo Beach under the umbrella of protection provided by Los Angeles City Lifeguards. During the 1930’s, lifeguards from many of the smaller cities in the Los Angeles area such as Hermosa Beach and Redondo Beach asked the County of Los Angeles to provide lifeguard services for their beaches. It was during these times that lifeguard competitions began to be held primarily to test and develop skills. As war approached in the 1940’s, lifeguard “waterman” skills began to be utilized by the military, particularly the Navy and Marines, to help teach “drown-proofing” to sailors and others.



*Lifeguards pulling in a dory - Venice, Circa 1935*

**B**y the 1950's, lifeguard services on Los Angeles area beaches were almost solely provided by the cities of Santa Monica, Long Beach, and Los Angeles or by the County of Los Angeles. City of Los Angeles lifeguards supervised bathers at over eleven miles of beaches including Will Rogers Beach near Pacific Palisades, Venice Beach, Dockweiler Beach in El Segundo and Cabrillo Beach. They also operated two municipal beach bathhouses -- the Sunset Pier Bathhouse and the Cabrillo Beach Bathhouse -- and provided lifeguard protection at Crowley Lake, Harbor Lake and Hansen Dam. It was during these times that lifeguards began to become more aware of their image and their status in the rescue community. Advances in lifesaving equipment and techniques during the 1950's began to change the face of lifeguarding. Due in large part to a Los Angeles County team of lifeguards sent to the first International Surf Lifesaving Competition held in Melbourne, Australia in 1956, lifeguards began to see the use of the rescue can and paddleboards as well as competitions featuring lifeguarding skills such as the "Iron Man". It was also in that decade that CPR was first introduced to lifeguards as a lifesaving skill.

In the 1960's, as surfing became popular, the first junior lifeguard programs were introduced. Tapping the abundant crop of young surfers, lifeguard services began to develop lifeguards with a love of the ocean environment and the skills to match. Led by the County, lifeguards in the City and elsewhere began to see a progression towards parity with firefighters and law enforcement in terms of image, and occasionally in terms of salary and benefits. It was during this time that the Aquatics Division of the City of Los Angeles divided their lifeguard service into two sections -- the Pool Section and the Beach Section. Each section had different leadership, testing and training and were united only by having the same top supervisor. While the Pool Section went on to concentrate on providing lifeguard protection and educational swimming programs such as swim lessons, the Beach Section became more closely aligned with their public safety counterparts such as firefighters and other beach lifeguard services.

As the 1970's arrived, the two sections became more and more different. City management attempted to bring them closer together by putting the entire Division under the supervision of the Chief Beach Lifeguard Bill O'Sullivan. This unhappy marriage finally came to an end in 1975 when the City signed an MOU with the County merging their two beach lifeguard operations. Although there was some animosity at first, City beach lifeguards were mostly happy to take advantage of the higher salaries and safety series retirement offered by the County. Former City beach lifeguards went on to bolster the already outstanding ranks of County beach lifeguards. In fact, in 1990 former City beach lifeguard Don Rohrer became Chief Lifeguard for the County of Los Angeles. Don is now retired and is the current CSLSA Vice President and USLA President. This merger, however, applied only to the beaches, it did not include the lakes where beach lifeguards had formerly provided protection. Crowley Lake, Hansen Dam and Harbor Lake were immediately turned over to the Pool Section. Former City beach lifeguards were brought in to provide training for the pool lifeguards who were now becoming open water lifeguards. As the seventies waned, the passage of Proposition 13, and the loss of tax revenue ended lifeguard protection at Harbor Lake. Within the first six months after lifeguards were withdrawn, a drowning occurred during what would have been guarded hours. Three months later another occurred, this time involving a child of three. The City remained steadfast however. Lifeguard service has not been restored as of this date.

In the 1980's, the revenue pinch was still being felt. As the Hansen Dam flood basin began to silt in, the lake behind the dam became smaller and smaller. When it became too small and shallow to allow boating in 1983, the facility was officially closed and lifeguards were withdrawn. This left the City with only one open water facility, Crowley Lake, which was

operated only six months of each year. But, in 1986, a strange reversal occurred. The City of Los Angeles Harbor Department, which had been partially subsidizing the County lifeguards on the inner beach at Cabrillo Beach, reached an impasse with the County. Rather than continue their agreement with the County, they turned to the City's own Department of Recreation and Parks for lifeguard services. Once again the Pool Section ponied up some lifeguards, got them the advanced training they needed and put them on the beach. As this new generation of City beach lifeguards began to supervise activities on the inner beach, they were always painfully aware of the presence of County lifeguards looking over their shoulders. There was a certain amount of stress and criticism, but as they became more adept at beach lifeguarding they regained a certain amount of respect.

The 1990's saw the construction of Lake Balboa in the Sepulveda Flood Control Basin and the rebuilding of a new Hansen Dam Aquatic Center. Neither the 27 acre Lake Balboa or the 9 acre recreation lake at Hansen Dam allow swimming, both being used primarily by boaters and fishermen. A 1 ½ acre swim lake adjoins the recreation lake at Hansen Dam. Lifeguards at both facilities are responsible for safety in the large flood control basins surrounding both facilities. At Lake Balboa this includes a wild stretch of the L.A. River and at Hansen Dam it includes a 40 acre quarry lake and the 20 plus acre remnant of the old lake. Open water lifeguards provide protection on weekends at Echo Lake and MacArthur Lake, in the middle of the City of Los Angeles. This decade also saw a return to regional and national lifeguard competitions by City lifeguards. In 2000, the "first" summer of the new century, City lifeguards placed a respectable 6<sup>th</sup> in the Regional Championship. As of this writing, the City of Los Angeles Aquatics Division operates, in addition to nearly 50 swimming pools, five open water facilities. There are currently 110 lifeguards in the Open Water Section. Total attendance at these four lakes and one beach last year was nearly 900,000. Lifeguards made 278 rescues or medical aids and made 11,326 preventative actions and 7,890 enforcement actions. There was one fatality due to suicide during guarded hours. City open water lifeguards provide back up and mutual aid to the Los Angeles Fire Department in the San Fernando Valley and the Port of Los Angeles and the Los Angeles County Fire Department -- Lifeguard Division in the Cabrillo Beach area.

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*Life guards towing a boat at Cabrillo Beach--1949*

